

## Minimum Wage - June 27, 2006

M. Speaker,

Last week the American people watched as this Republican Majority led the charge against the estate tax.

Republicans argued they were doing it for the benefit of small businesses and independent farmers. But the Majority could not provide even one concrete example that supported their claim.

What Republicans were really interested in was the 0.3 percent of Americans who do pay this tax...super-rich families, 18 of whom have spent a combined 490 million dollars over the last 10 years in their quest to make the estate tax disappear.

Today, I would ask my friends in the Majority to compare that sum - 490 million dollars - to the amount of money a full-time minimum wage earner makes in an entire year: 10,712 dollars.

The minimum wage hasn't been increased in 9 years. Because of inflation, it is effectively at its lowest level of purchasing power since 1955.

And this Republican Majority wants to keep it that way.

In fact, last night in the Rules Committee, the Majority refused to allow an amendment to this bill that would have increased the minimum wage. We won't have the chance to debate it here today.

Contrary to the claims of Republicans, minimum-wage earners aren't just teenagers. Instead, 46 percent of them are over the age of 25, and 35 percent are the sole wage earners for their families.

Despite what Republicans will say today, there no empirical evidence to suggest that an increase in the minimum wage would either increase poverty or cost small-business jobs.

In fact, the studies available show the opposite to be the case.

20 states have higher minimum wage standards than are federally required. A Center for American Progress study found that between 1998 and 2003, small business employment in those states grew at an average of 9.4 percent. It grew at an average of 6.6 percent everywhere else.

There is also no established connection between increases in the minimum wage and an increase in poverty - contrary to the Majority's rhetoric.

Once again, the opposite is true: when you increase salaries in a way that does not decrease employment opportunities, just what an increase in the minimum wage does, then you help people raise themselves out of poverty.

Finally, consider that 81 percent - 81 percent - of respondents to a January poll said that raising the minimum wage was an important priority in their mind.

And so, M. Speaker, my Republican friends have found themselves in a bind. In their steadfast and determined opposition to even a moderate increase in the minimum wage, they can't claim to be speaking for the American people.

They can't claim to be speaking on behalf of the available evidence either, because that evidence indicates that an increase in our minimum wage will help American workers and the American economy, not hurt them.

Republicans can't really claim to be speaking for anyone - anyone accept, that is, the small group of rich business groups who have dedicated a tremendous amount of time and energy to fighting a minimum wage increase.

That shouldn't come as a surprise, of course.

Ultra-rich special interest groups were the reason Republicans worked so hard to overturn the estate tax last week - and so we really shouldn't expect anything different today.

M. Speaker, what we are seeing is a democracy that has been broken by the Majority - par for the course from the Party that recently tabled the renewal of the Voting Rights Act.

Our elected officials are supposed to base their decisions on the will of the people, but this Leadership cares only about the will of a few rich businessmen.

We all know that our democracy was designed to keep this House responsive to the needs of the public, but history shows us that this Leadership listens only to well-paid lobbyists, and is willing to do almost anything to ensure their agenda is implemented.

In the eyes of this Republican leadership, the democratic process itself has become nothing more than an enemy to be defeated.

For years, the Republican Majority has repeatedly assaulted it, abusing the rules and the ethical standards of this Congress to get what it wants - no matter the price.

Its fundamental arrogance has allowed it to brush aside the desires of the American people time and again, and focus only on the wealthy and the well-connected.

That is what Republicans did again last night, when the House Rules Committee refused to make in order our minimum wage amendment.

If Republicans had any real faith that their ideas were better than those of Democrats, or that they could convince the

American people that a minimum wage increase should be opposed, then they would have let the whole House vote freely on that amendment.

But they were afraid of letting democracy take its course. And so, they stopped it in its tracks.

M. Speaker, these last two weeks have demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt who is working for the American people, and who is working against them.

When Democrats opposed a repeal of the estate tax last week, we did it because we believe those who have benefited the most from our society have an obligation to give the most back.

But Republicans cared only about helping the richest families in America to stay rich.

I ask my Republican colleagues: what is the American dream to you? Is it working 40 hours a week for poverty wages? Or is it the belief that honest workers will be given an honest chance to build the life for themselves that they deserve?

My fellow Democrats and I have not forgotten that dream. We will continue to stand united, behind Americans as they pursue it, and for an open and honest democratic government that demands it.

And we will not rest until we have made this House the People's House once more - because the citizens of this great nation deserve no less.